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## **PART TWO**

### **PERMEABLE BOUNDARIES, PLACES IN-BETWEEN**





JIM LEACH

## IN-BETWEEN STATES: SARAH POLLEY'S *TAKE THIS WALTZ* AND XAVIER DOLAN'S *LAURENCE ANYWAYS*

### Abstract

Two recent films by young Canadian directors, deal with characters entangled in in-between states. Margot in Sarah Polley's *Take This Waltz* is caught between her comfortable marriage and her passionate affair with a neighbour, while Laurence in Xavier Dolan's *Laurence Anyways* is more radically unsettled by his decision to become a woman. Both films lay themselves open to accusations of superficiality, by drawing on the conventions of romantic comedy (*Take This Waltz*) or by a flamboyantly melodramatic style (*Laurence Anyways*), but both work to unsettle easy assumptions about the relations of surface and depth, image and self, fantasy and bodily reality.

### Key words

*Sarah Polley; Xavier Dolan; national identity; sexuality; romantic comedy; melodrama; postmodernism; fantasy*

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We could see Canada as a nation desperately searching for full communion while at the same time recognizing its impossibility. This is really key: we seem to recognize and accept the impossibility of full union because we sense it's a false ideal (Monk 2013: 253–254).

In this essay, I will examine two recent Canadian films, *Take This Waltz* (Sarah Polley 2011) and *Laurence Anyways* (Xavier Dolan 2012), which accord remarkably well with Katherine Monk's formulation in their depiction of characters searching for, and failing to achieve, "full communion". In doing so, I would like to resist the rather too neat assumption that these representations derive from something Monk calls "the Canadian psyche" (2001: 10). It is simply not true that, as she claims,

“every film ... to emerge from the Canadian tradition has a realistic approach to sex that denies the fiction of a happy-ever-after” (2013: 254), or that, as she suggests in her earlier book on Canadian cinema, *Weird Sex and Snowshoes*, “we clearly don’t buy into” the fantasy of “the sexually omnipotent James Bond” (2001: 142). Leaving aside the fact that most Canadians prefer to watch Hollywood films, many Canadian films do not conform to this model and many non-Canadian films adopt a similarly “realistic” approach to sexuality. On the other hand, as Richard Cavell and Peter Dickinson have remarked, “the stories we tell about our sexualities are one of the ways in which we articulate our sense of nationhood” (2006: xv), and what I will argue here is that these two films are noteworthy examples of contemporary Canadian cinema because the stories they tell resonate within, but are not limited to, the national culture in which they are embedded.

The two young directors of these films would, at first glance, seem to have little in common, apart from the fact that they both began their careers as child actors.<sup>1</sup> However, while they make their films within the very different cultural frameworks of English Canada and Quebec, they are both working in environments in which the national and the international interact and overlap. Polley, who has established an international profile as an actress, has said that she would be “excited to make a film anywhere, but ... I’ll probably always feel quite rooted in Canada, and I think my films will generally have a sense of place there” (quoted in Milzoff). Dolan came under some suspicion in Quebec for insisting that “today more than ever, it is obvious that Quebec cinema is becoming international,” but he was quick to add, “Quebec is an inspirational place: our habits allow us to express the ideas of a surviving people” (quoted in Fradet 2012b: 46–47). Clearly, both directors would see the issues of sexuality and gender in their films as shaped by their cultural roots, and the sense of being in-between experienced by Margot (Michelle Williams) in *Take This Waltz* and Laurence (Melvin Poupaud) in *Laurence Anyways* has a special resonance in both cultures, but with rather different implications. Despite these differences, the depiction of Toronto and Montreal, the two main locations in these films, illustrates Polley’s belief that “the more a film is specific about where it is, the more the universality of the story resonates” (quoted in Milzoff 2012).

Polley’s first feature film as director was *Away from Her* (2006), which received widespread critical acclaim for its depiction of a man (Gordon Pinsent) struggling to come to terms with the effects of Alzheimer’s Disease on his wife (Julie Christie). Polley was not yet thirty, and many critics praised her nuanced and restrained approach to such a topic and the performances she drew from her veteran stars. Dolan was only twenty when his first feature, *J’ai tué ma mère/I Killed My Mother* (2009) was released. The film went on to win prizes at the Cannes Film Festival, but it came under attack from some critics in Quebec, who resented Dolan’s presumption in daring to write, direct, star in, produce, edit and design the costumes for his film.

The two films I have chosen to focus on were less well received than their directors’ other work. *Take This Waltz*, Polley’s second feature, was often seen as

a step back after *Away From Her* and as a rather insignificant romantic comedy, lacking the subtlety of the first feature or the challenging fusion of documentary and fiction in *Stories We Tell* (2013), Polley's investigation into the mysterious circumstances of her own birth. Regarded by many as a trivial genre film, with an American star, *Take This Waltz* could be dismissed as "a relative disappointment, content to develop predictable characters and stories" (Thomson 2013: 62) and "weighed down by an overly whimsical tone that frequently flirted with preciousness" (Porton 2013: 36). The reception of *Laurence Anyways* was rather less antagonistic than that of *J'ai tué ma mère* or Dolan's second feature, *Les Amours imaginaires/Heartbeats* (2010), but the relative lack of outrage seemed to imply that it was a less challenging film. It may have seemed less personal than the first two films because Dolan did not act in it, but there were still objections that, despite its length (almost three hours), its depiction of a man who decides to undergo a sex change was "concerned once again much more with the external effects of an affirmation of identity than with the very radical nature of this change" (Dequen 2012: 64).

My contention in this essay is that both of these films repay closer attention because of the ways in which they belie their initial appearances to explore characters undergoing changes that leave them in "in-between" states that call into question the categories through which their culture (including movies) defines what is "normal" and tries to regulate gender roles and identities. Early on in *Take This Waltz*, Margot changes flights in Montreal on a trip from Nova Scotia to Toronto and admits that she is "afraid of connections – in airports" and that she doesn't "like being in-between things." In the course of the film, she finds herself in exactly this situation, caught between the security offered by her stable but unexciting marriage to Lou (Seth Rogen), who is writing a cookbook consisting solely of recipes for chicken, and her attraction to Daniel (Luke Kirby), an artist who earns his living pulling a rickshaw around the city for tourists and refers to himself as a "modern-day hobo". The idea of being in-between in *Laurence Anyways* is not stated so explicitly but permeates the entire film after Laurence, a schoolteacher, announces, on his 35<sup>th</sup> birthday, that he wants to live the rest of his life as a woman. While he prepares for the operation, he dresses as a woman and loses his job, and is caught between genders. He must deal not only with the hostility of people who feel threatened by this affront to established gender codes but also with the difficulties that his partner Frédérique (Suzanne Clément), who works in the film industry and to whom he still feels strongly attached, has in coping with the effects of his decision.

While *Take This Waltz* seems to be (and is) much the simpler film, concerned only with heterosexual relations, its genre and tone are much more difficult to pin down than many of its reviewers suggested. Its depiction of the break-up of a marriage suggests a comparison with *Blue Valentine* (Derek Cianfrance, 2010), an American "indie" film in which Michelle Williams also starred, but, whereas that film, maintains a bleak tone, with only a few momentary respites, from beginning to end, *Take This Waltz* starts out as if it will be a light romantic comedy.

Only gradually do darker undercurrents emerge, and the film itself thus seems to exist in an in-between state similar to the one that Margot finds so disturbing. It is as if the film wants to draw us into Margot's desires, creating utopian spaces full of potential in which she is unable to find a place and that are finally revealed as unrealistic. While Polley's film thus initially presents itself as a modest genre film, *Laurence Anyways* has been aptly described as a "big, dreamy, audacious picture" (Brady), and Dolan provocatively claims that the film that influenced him most was *Titanic* (James Cameron 1997) (quoted in Fradet 2012b: 47). His film certainly has an epic dimension, but its blending of melodrama in the context of queer sexuality, and what one reviewer called its "expressive maximalism" (Wigley 2012: 95), suggest a sensibility closer to directors such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Pedro Almodovar.<sup>2</sup>

### **New things grow old**

One of the staple devices of the romantic comedy is the so-called "meet cute," in which "the couple first encounter each other, generally in comic and prophetic circumstances" (Mortimer 2010: 5–6). The first meeting of Margot and Daniel in *Take This Waltz* would certainly seem to accord with this definition, as most reviewers noted. It occurs at Louisbourg in Nova Scotia, a postmodern-style interactive museum, where actors play the roles of the inhabitants of an eighteenth-century fortress. The first image we see of this settlement is, significantly, of the interior of a church in which a wedding is taking place, offering an image of a traditional marriage quite different from the modern version that we will see in the film. But it soon becomes clear that this image is a simulation, which Margot is watching as part of the research for her work on the museum's website. As she moves away, she gets drawn into another simulation, the enactment of a punishment in which she is invited to flog the offender. She is embarrassed and especially annoyed by an audience member who encourages her to be more severe. This sequence introduces the film's concern with fantasy and bodies, but it also sets the romantic plot in motion. On the return flight, Daniel, who was the heckler, sits next to her, and, when they share a taxi from the airport in Toronto, she admits she is married and discovers that he lives just across the street from her home.

Coincidence is a common characteristic of romantic comedy, but this one is so extreme, and implausible, that it draws attention to the artifice in a way that may have alienated some viewers but that signals Polley's interest in "storytelling and the way we construct stories" (quoted in Porton 2013: 36). Although this "cute" opening is the film's first sustained narrative development, the preceding credits sequence has already introduced a disruption in the storytelling process that can only be fully recognized at the end. An as yet unidentified woman moves in and out of focus in a kitchen, which we might retroactively locate in the home, to which we are introduced on her return to Toronto, where Margot lives with Lou. It is only when this sequence recurs at the end of the film that we discover that

the man who enters at the end is not Lou but Daniel, with whom she has been living since leaving her husband. At the beginning, the transition from the credits to the Louisbourg sequence is accomplished by shots of the feet of a woman who is carrying a suitcase and who then sits in front of a mirror in an empty room, presumably after the end of the affair whose beginning we are about to see. Although this is not apparent at the time, and easily missed later on, the effect is to suggest that the events in Nova Scotia, and indeed the rest of the film, are depicted in flashback filtered through Margot's memory and perhaps shaped by her imagination, an impression that is reinforced by the fact that she is present in every scene.



**Figure 1.** Margot (Michelle Williams) and Lou (Seth Rogen) in the kitchen. Photo by Michael Gibson, courtesy of Mongrel Media

Daniel certainly functions as a fantasy figure for Margot, and, as Catherine Wheatley suggests in her review, “one might speculate about whether he’s even real” (2012: 113). But the relations between fantasy and reality are highly unstable in this film, and the possible shift into fantasy must be held in tension with elements that work in the reverse direction. As another critic notes, “throughout the film, there are scenes that are set up to be highly romantic or erotic, but small things happen that return both Margot and the viewer into reality” (Debono 2012: 74). Yet these returns to reality are embedded in a narrative that, as we have seen, bears signs of being filtered through the imagination (whether we regard this as Margot’s, Polley’s or



the film's). One key moment occurs, after Daniel has moved away, when Margot decides to leave Lou and runs from her home to the beach, which has been identified as Daniel's favourite spot. The camera tracks in behind her as she sits beside the water, and she turns and smiles when Daniel's voice says, "There you are." However, we do not see him, and the following sequence in which they make love thus seems like a projection of her desire. But if what follows starts out as a possible fantasy within a fantasy, the film goes on to depict the dissolution of that fantasy.

As Polley herself suggests, the film raises the question: "Can passion and familiarity co-exist? Or does one crowd out the other?" (quoted in Johnson 2012: 71). This conflict governs the film's treatment of space, especially in the contrast between the domestic interiors, in which Margot and Lou are mostly seen together (Figure 1), and the outside, associated with Daniel and the possibilities he represents, first introduced in the natural and heritage spaces of Nova Scotia but also present in the magic spaces of Toronto as the film depicts it during a summer heat-wave. The division is not absolute, however, and as Luc Montpellier, the film's cinematographer, explains on the DVD, great care was taken to create the effect of outside light streaming into the house. As Margot becomes more and more estranged from Lou, there is a sequence in which she sits inside listening to music and Lou sits outside on the porch looking at her through the window. The music cuts in and out abruptly as the editing alternates between them, and they touch the windowpane and mime kisses through it, before he goes in and they embrace. Later, the window again separates them when he tells her to leave.

The domestic world of the home has been introduced, after Margot's return from Nova Scotia, by a close-up of an alarm clock going off in the morning, and the camera tracks up to look down on Margot and Lou lying on the bed. This overhead shot, and several others like it, recall a similar image in Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), in which Polley appeared, that represents an idealized memory of the family that Stephens (Ian Holm) has lost. The shots here convey a similar sense of security and vulnerability, but a key difference is the absence of the child sleeping between the couple in Egoyan's film. The only time a child is mentioned in *Take This Waltz* is when Margot suggests they might get a dog, and Lou replies, "A dog is like a starter for a kid." Although there is no sense that Margot thinks a child might be the answer to their problems, it is Lou who says he doesn't want to talk about it.

When they do try to express their love, the language translates sex into violence with playful phrases like, "I want to kick the snot out of you," and they live together in a casual intimacy in which he can wander around the bathroom when she is on the toilet or taking a shower. On the one occasion they do go out together, for their fifth anniversary, Daniel pulls them in his rickshaw as the sun slowly sets on Toronto, but Lou rebuffs her request for conversation by telling her, "I don't have anything to say... We live together, we know everything already." It is only after Margot tells him she is leaving that he finds words to express his regret that they will not grow old together, in a long montage sequence, which since Margot remains offscreen, is offered directly to the camera.

If the domestic scenes depict a safe space in which linguistic rituals regulate the bodily lives of two people living in close proximity, Margot's attraction to Daniel offers a more playful and ambiguous relation between language and bodies to which she is at first reluctant to commit herself. While she hesitates, the film explores the relations between bodies and language, reality and fantasy. This is most evident in a series of sequences that begins with Margot working out with a group of women in a swimming pool. She notices that Daniel is watching and is so excited (or embarrassed) that she urinates in the water, an infraction that is exposed by a dye that turns her urine bright blue, prompting the male instructor to end the session. In the showers afterwards, the naked women stand around talking, revealing bodies of different shapes and ages. When Margot speaks of wanting "something new," one of the women tells her, "New things get old." There is a cut from the exposed female bodies to Daniel and Margot sitting outside a café, where he describes what he would do to her body if they made love, using the past tense as if it had already happened. The atmosphere is broken when they both burst into laughter, and she comments, "None of this is going to happen."



**Figure 2.** Daniel (Luke Kirby) and Margot on the Scrambler at Centre Island. Photo by Michael Gibson, courtesy of Mongrel Media

They project their desire into an imaginary (but very precise) future by making an appointment to kiss on the same date in thirty years at the lighthouse in Louisbourg at 2PM Eastern Standard Time. This lighthouse was first seen when Margot sat by the sea in a picturesque landscape after her humiliating

experience at the fortress. After her hesitation prompts Daniel to move away, he informs her on a postcard with a picture of the lighthouse that he pushes through her mailbox. There is a fade to black, followed by a shot of a silhouetted couple in front of the lighthouse, which suggests that the film has jumped forward to the time of their assignation (except that the couple are clearly young), but a sudden cut to Margot in bed relocates the image to her imagination. The abrupt return to reality echoes earlier sequences in which the couple escape into imaginary worlds, as when they perform together in a beautiful underwater ballet only for Margot to draw away when Daniel touches her after they surface, and when they enjoy an exhilarating scrambler ride on Centre Island that comes to a sudden end when the music cuts out and the mechanical apparatus of the ride is revealed (Figure 2).

The song that accompanies the ride is “Video Killed the Radio Star” by the Buggles, released in 1979. Along with the lighting effects, it reinforces the visceral effect of this sequence that captures the elation of the moment when Margot no longer feels that she is between things, a utopian energy found in much of the music used in the film. Yet Tim Kroenert has suggested that the music has another, more critical, function, to signal that Margot is “in a state of arrested development,” and, as he notes, “the film’s title comes from a Leonard Cohen song that would have been released during Margot’s childhood” (2012: 31). At one point, Daniel mocks her for using out-of-date language, and it is perhaps not insignificant that the film she and Lou see on their anniversary outing is *Mon oncle Antoine* (Claude Jutra 1971). Margot was born in 1982 so this film, often regarded as the best Canadian film ever made, is not from her childhood, but it does end with a freeze-frame of its adolescent protagonist caught at a moment when he must choose what to do with his life.

After Daniel (apparently) finds Margot on the beach, there is an abrupt cut to a loft, empty except for a bed in the centre, around which the camera moves as the naked couple make love passionately. The visual absence of Daniel in the previous scene suggests that this is a wish-fulfilment fantasy on Margot’s part. However, the graphic physical reality of what we now see contradicts the impression that this may be an illusion, and the tension between fantasy and reality is reinforced as the camera continues to circle and creates a fluid montage sequence depicting time passing, with the couple in various poses and then having group sex with other men and women, all to the lugubrious accompaniment of Leonard Cohen singing the song after which the film is named. The sequence ends with the couple quietly watching television as Margot had earlier done with Lou. The implication is that, to the extent that Margot’s desires have been fulfilled, the passion has gone out of the relationship, and at the end of the film she is left sitting alone on the Centre Island ride.

## Not yet

As might be expected, the opening sequences of *Laurence Anyways* are more immediately complicated than the apparently conventional opening of *Take This Waltz*. At first, we see only a black screen and hear voices from what seems to be a conversation between a female interviewer and a male author whom she addresses as Laurence Alia. When she asks him what he wants, he says he is looking for someone who can understand his language and who will question the distinction between those who are marginalized and those who “claim to be normal”. Our first sight of Laurence is as a blurred female outline, and then the camera moves along a street past onlookers staring in apparent surprise, a reaction we will later recognize as provoked by Laurence’s first public appearance dressed as a woman. This opening thus first frustrates the look of the spectator by withholding the image and then reminds us of the act of looking, while now withholding the object of these looks (even while representing the subjective point of view of that object). As the narrative develops, this sequence foreshadows the scandal caused by Laurence’s rejection of “normal” gender codes and emphasizes how the sense of self is mediated through the look of others, but here it draws the spectator’s attention to the construction of the film’s story.

The film’s narration, its construction of its story, is even more ambiguously linked to the protagonist’s consciousness than in *Take This Waltz*, partly because of the multitude of other characters and partly because of the forceful presence of Frédérique (or Fred as she is usually known, see Figure 3). However, as in Polley’s film, the ending returns to the beginning. After the opening street scene, a caption situates the next sequence “10 years earlier,” in 1989, when Laurence announces that he wants to become a woman, and the film then proceeds chronologically, with captions indicating the passage of time and with extracts from the interview, which eventually becomes visually present, filling in gaps and suggesting Laurence’s response to events. At the end, after Fred has married and moved to Trois-Rivières and Laurence has spent some time in the US, they both return to Montreal and meet in a bar. The reunion does not go well and they leave separately. The final sequence is a flashback to their first meeting (which we have not seen before), on a film set where Fred is working, and they introduce themselves. The ending of the plot is thus literally the beginning of the story, but we are now aware of all the emotional upheaval that will grow out of this meeting.

Laurence’s decision to become a woman is motivated by his sense that his life as a man “isn’t real,” but, as in *Take That Waltz*, the boundary between reality and fantasy is difficult to define. While Laurence is not present in every scene as Margot is, and the snatches of the interview do not amount to a narration, the film’s surrealist elements create what amounts to a “mindscreen” (Kawin 1978: 10) that seems to be generated by the tensions in the relationship between Laurence and Fred.<sup>3</sup> When he is beaten up on the street, a series of grotesque faces from Hieronymus Bosch paintings suggest his sense of a hostile, monstrous reality. Later, when he questions Fred about the men she has been with since she left

him, her (false) admission that she is in love is followed by a shot of a butterfly emerging from his mouth. When Fred reads the book of poems he has sent her, water pours down on her inside the house, and, when they escape to an island, colourful clothes fall from the sky, evoking their momentary elation. In addition to this fantastic imagery, the screen is often suffused in coloured light, reminding us of an early conversation in which Laurence and Fred discuss the sexual implications of different colours.



**Figure 3.** Laurence (Melvin Poupaud) and Fred (Suzanne Clément) talk things over. © Lyla Films / Shayne Laverdière: still photographer

Their relationship, as depicted at the beginning of the film is based on a rejection of social conventions. They gleefully compile an ever-expanding list of “things that minimize our pleasures,” but, at the end, Laurence tells her that their relationship was doomed even before he decided to become a woman, because they were “already marginal.” He refers to their jobs and their families as obstacles that prevented them from fulfilling their potential, and, when they turn to their respective families after he announces his decision, neither proves very helpful. His mother (Nathalie Baye) greets him coldly and seems dominated by his sick father (Vincent Davy), who has never accepted him and now spends his days in front of the television, although Laurence’s decision eventually leads to her decision to move out and get a divorce. Fred’s family is more supportive but hostile to Laurence and opposed to her attempts to come to terms with his determination



to become a woman. After she breaks down and moves to Trois-Rivières, she marries and has a child, but comes to feel trapped in her new family life. Yet the idea of the family remains a potent one, and Laurence has earlier offered to give her a child and a house in an effort to persuade her to stay. She later confesses that she had an abortion before she left him.

When Laurence announces his decision, Fred asks him why he didn't tell her he was gay, but his sexuality is more complex and ambiguous than she assumes. He is anxious to continue their relationship, and, after she leaves, he starts a new relationship with Charlotte (Magalie Lépine-Blondeau), who becomes jealous of his obsession with Fred. The fact that "Laurence as a woman still loves Fred and will even have a girlfriend," means, as Zoé Protat suggests, "the film deals not with orientation but the nature of sexuality" (2012: 16). Indeed, the status of Laurence's sexuality remains highly ambiguous. At one point, he mentions that he is taking hormones but has not yet had the operation. Since the film does not show any medical appointments or procedures, while it emphasizes his appearances as a woman, it remains possible that he becomes a transvestite rather than a transsexual. Even after he tracks down Fred in Trois-Rivières, six years after he first decided to become a woman, she puts her hand on his crotch, and he tells her, "Not yet." The effect is to call into question conventional gender definitions, making clear that "Laurence never attains the status of 'woman' because there is no 'woman' to become" (Armbrecht 2013: 36).

The in-between state that Laurence assumes by deciding to change genders may or may not involve a bodily transformation, but it is also a matter of language and culture. It complicates the choice of pronouns, "he" or "she," in referring to the character, and Laurence's first book of poems is called "D'Elles," the female pronouns implying that it deals with the two "shes" in the central relationship. Dolan highlights the ambiguity by giving Laurence a name that can, in French, be used for either gender, while Fred's familiar name makes her sound male rather than female. This linguistic uncertainty extends to the cultural implications of the story. By casting a French actor to play the role of Laurence, and giving the character a French background, Dolan may have been meeting the needs of a Canada-France co-production, and reaching out to a French audience, but the mixture of a French accent and Québécois colloquialisms, suggests that Laurence's in-between state mirrors Quebec's cultural situation. Anglophone Quebec is almost completely absent, but Fred, who normally speaks colloquial Québécois French lapses into English when she gets excited, and the interviewer keeps switching into English when she speaks to Laurence off the record. These slippages are ironically replicated in the film's title, which is in (colloquial) English even in the French version, but, in the final analysis, while language is important, the film suggests that the characters are unable to articulate their motives and feelings, which are conveyed more fully, but necessarily ambiguously, by its extravagant mixture of images and music.

In other words, the film works as what Joshua Rothkopf (2013) calls "a melodrama about hidebound principles and body-bound realities." Laurence tries to transcend these constraints through poetry, and he and Fred often refer to the idea

of escaping to the Isle of Black, a fictional place alluding to the Isle of Wight and this film's equivalent to the Centre Island ride in *Take This Waltz*. When they do manage to get there, after Fred has left her new family, they enjoy an exhilarating sense of release, but, like Margot's ride, it can only be a temporary escape from reality (Figure 4). The film does imply some hope of change through its setting in a period when, according to Dolan, "people were scared shitless of anything different," even though Montreal "was a place many thought of as open-minded" (quoted in Hays 2012), implying that things may be better in the present. Within the film, the younger generation does seem more willing to accept Laurence's decision. When Laurence first appears in the classroom dressed as a woman, there is a long silence, until one student asks a question about the assignment they have been working on, and the class proceeds as normal; it is his colleagues who decide to fire him because of pressure from parents and the Ministry of Education. Yet Fred's experience suggests that change will not be a straightforward process, because, even though she tells Laurence, "Let's do this together," and insists to her sister that "our generation can take this," she is unable finally to adjust.

While the narrative ends with Laurence and Fred apart, the film's imagery suggests they enjoy a symbiotic relationship that organically connects them. As Tara Brady (2012) aptly puts it:

Throughout Laurence and Fred occupy all points of the gender spectrum. They're both swaggeringly masculine and ravishingly feminine – sometimes simultaneously, sometimes competitively so. It's not just the sex change.

As a woman, Laurence starts to look like Fred, suggesting that his overriding desire is not so much to have her as to become her (taking on her feminine vitality). Before she decides to settle down and raise a family, Fred goes to the opposite extreme and walks into an arts ball dressed in an evening gown with a plunging back that makes her look like a drag queen. At the end, when they meet in the bar, they both now have long dark hair, as opposed to Fred's profuse red hair and Laurence's short hair in the past. In the final flashback to their first meeting Fred has short "boyish" hair, which is very like Laurence's at the point their relationship begins. It is as if they move through a complex dance of identity and difference, in which they reflect the changes in each other but can only briefly coexist in the same place and time.

### **Being oneself**

As we have seen, in their different ways, both films lay themselves open to accusations of superficiality, either by drawing on the conventions of a popular Hollywood genre (*Take This Waltz*) or by a flamboyant style that rejects the psychological realism expected of Québécois art cinema (*Laurence Anyways*). I have



**Figure 4.** Laurence returning from the Isle of Black. © Lyla Films / Shayne Laverdière: still photographer

argued that in both films appearances are deceptive, and that each unsettles easy assumptions about the relations of surface and depth, image and self, fantasy and bodily reality. Rather than seeing these relations as oppositional, both films suggest that they flow into each other. Thomas J.D. Armbrrecht, referring to Dolan's film, suggests, "fluidity is itself an important trope in the film: water can easily be understood as an element in perpetual change" (2013: 38). Water is at least as important an element in Polley's film, central to the pool, shower and beach sequences, and functions equally there as a motif representing the flow of desire and "the permeability of physical boundaries and between ideas conceived as opposites ... in order to pose more profound questions about the state of becoming of a human being" (Armbrrecht 2013: 32).

The period setting of *Laurence Anyways* has led critics to evoke its affinity with "French postmodernism of the 1980s" (Protat 2012: 17). In cinematic terms, the implication here is that Dolan's film was influenced by the French "cinéma du look," as developed in the 1980s in the films of Jean-Jacques Beineix, Luc Besson and Leos Carax, often dismissed for its use of techniques associated with advertising and music video at the expense of "social or ideological substance" (Vincendeau 1996: 50). Indeed, an early sequence in *Laurence Anyways* that



shows Laurence and Fred making love in a bed over which hangs a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* is clearly an allusion to the opening sequence of Beineix's *37°2 le matin* (1986), usually known in English as *Betty Blue*, whose graphic sexual imagery sets up a film (even longer than Dolan's) that explores the emotional disintegration of its rebellious heroine.<sup>4</sup> This French movement had a belated impact in Quebec during the period in which Dolan's film is set, in films such as *Maelström* (Denis Villeneuve 1999), *Un Crabe dans la tête/Soft Shell Man* (2001) and *La Turbulence des fluides/Chaos and Desire* (Manon Briand, 2002), which were also accused of a superficial concern with appearances rather than building on the realist and art cinema traditions that critics valued. In the case of *Laurence Anyways*, however, some critics were willing to accept that "it is from the surface that all the depth of Dolan's work emerges, nailing appearances in order to go beyond them" (Fradet 2012a: 48).

While adhering more closely to the conventions of classical narrative, *Take This Waltz* moves very far away from the apparently superficial generic imagery of its opening sequences. Near the end of the film, Geraldine (Sarah Silverman), Margot's sister-in-law, an alcoholic whose struggles with addiction mirror Margot's discontent with her married life, tells her, "Life has a gap in it. It just does." Polley herself has said the idea for the film was planted when she read Buddhist writings that addressed "the concept of emptiness and having a gap in your life" (quoted in Johnson 2012: 71). Not only is this "gap" central to Buddhist thought but also to the Lacanian psychoanalytic theory on which Monk draws in the quotation I have used as the epigraph to this essay and according to which "desire, be it understood as sexual or discursive, is founded upon ... a lack: one desires because that desire can never be fulfilled (just as language can never adequately name its object)" (Cavell and Dickinson xxv). The film may illustrate this idea, but it leaves us in an ambiguous relation to Margot's efforts to fill the gap.

Both films deal with characters who challenge what they experience as oppressive gender roles prescribed as "normal," but whose determined pursuit of their desires is ultimately seen as destructive both for them and the other people in their lives. In doing so, they make it difficult for the spectator to identify in a straightforward way with characters who are in many ways attractive, and the focal point of the narratives, but whose actions are often highly dubious. The question that Tara Brady (2012) finds in *Laurence Anyways* can also be applied to *Take This Waltz*: "Can anyone be true to his or her inner self in the context of romantic love? More importantly, should anyone?" In the end, both films refuse to judge characters who have tested the limits of desire and must confront the gap in their lives. Armbrecht points out that, "whatever stages she goes through or people she meets, Laurence remains Laurence, anyway" (2013: 32), while Catherine Wheatley similarly suggests, "the bittersweet truth of Polley's beautiful film is that it's inevitable: no matter who we love, we are always ourselves, and with it we are always alone" (2012: 113). These endings may correspond to a Canadian tradition that, as Monk suggests, is suspicious of the happy endings associated with Hollywood; yet the experience of watching these vibrant and often viscer-

ally affective films depicting in-between states resonates not only with the perennial question of Canadian identity but also with much broader questions of the postmodern, or simply the human, condition.<sup>5</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Polley started acting at the age of four and achieved fame playing the young heroine in the CBC-TV series *Road to Avonlea* (1990–94). Dolan started at the age of five on Quebec television.
- 2 The sexual indeterminacy of the characters in many films by these German and Spanish directors gives them a “queer” tonality relevant to Dolan’s film, but I am thinking here particular of the depiction of the transsexual Erwin/Elvira in Fassbinder’s *In a Year With 13 Moons* (1978) and the plethora of transvestites and transsexuals in Almodovar’s *Bad Education* (2004).
- 3 Kawin uses the term “mindscreen” for the representation of subjectivity not through what a character says (voice-over) or sees (subjective camera) but through what he/she thinks. However, it is clear from his use of the concept that the mind in question is not necessarily conscious. His discussion of *Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais 1961) is suggestive in relation to *Laurence Anyways* in the claim that it presents “the interrelated mindscreens of at least two characters” (1978: 80). This would allow for the presence of Fred’s subjectivity in Dolan’s film, although the title and the interview material that runs throughout ensure that Laurence’s mindscreen is dominant.
- 4 The allusion also points to a contrast in that Beineix’s film was notorious for its graphic sex scenes whereas, as Dolan points out, *Laurence Anyways* is “a film about sexual identity, but without sex” (quoted in Armbrrecht 2013: 32).
- 5 Neither of these films pays much attention to the diasporic communities in Canada to whom in-between states would also be quite familiar.

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